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ABSTRACT

Three possible explanations for superintendent succession focus on poor administrative performance, district response strategies, and the politics of the chief executive's relationship with the school board. To analyze succession in the context of declining enrollment, a case study survey was conducted of 56 school districts whose peak enrollment year was 1970-71 or before. Data from these districts were gathered over a 10-year period to allow enough time for succession to occur. Performance was measured according to three variables (pupil-teacher ratio, per pupil expenditures, and facility utilization), district response according to 10 strategies (including lobbying for tax increases, freeze hiring, and reduction-in-force), and the politics of succession in terms of the superintendent's relationship to three constituencies: the board, teachers, and community. Results of discriminant analysis of survey findings confirm the usefulness of performance, strategy, and political variables as predictors of executive succession. The data suggest that the superintentent's relationships with the board and the community are of particular political significance and that bold administrative response strategies and high per pupil expenditures tend to result in succession. Superintendent-community relations, superintendent-board relations, response scope, and per pupil expenditures thus emerge as the four principal factors distinguishing succession and nonsuccession districts. A 44-item reference list is appended. (JBM)

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Predicting Succession Under Conditions of Enrollment Decline

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Predicting Succession Under Conditions of Enrollment Decline

The analysis of the circumstances surrounding a change in leadership has a long and rich history in the literature. Actually, two separate bodies of evidence cover this topic. On the one hand, scholars in the management-organization literature focused on executive succession in either athletic teams (see Allen, Panian, & Lotz, 1979; Brown, 1982; Eitzen & Yetman, 1972; Gamson & Scotch, 1964; Grusky, 1963) or industrial organizations (see Allen & Panian, 1982; Gordon & Becker, 1964; Gouldner, 1954; Grusky, 1961; Guest, 1962; James and Soref, 1981; McEachern, 1977; Osborn, Jauch, Martin, & Glueck, 1980; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1980). These works are useful to some extent, but they seem limited for our purposes because, first, they do not use educational organizations as the unit of analysis and, second, they seem to concentrate more often on the effects of succession rather than its antecedents (but see Allen & Panian, 1982; Osborn et al., 1980; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1980).

Researchers in the politics of education literature, on the other hand, have focused their efforts on educational organizations and studied the factors that determine a leadership change (Carlson, 1962; Freeborn, 1966; Lutz, 1982; Lutz & Iannaccone, 1978; Walden, 1966). However, this literature has been criticized recently on theoretical, methodological, and data analysis grounds (Mitchell, 1978) and seems to suffer from equivocal and qualified findings (Eblen, 1975; Mitchell & Thorsted, 1976; Moen, 1971).

One limitation plagues both literatures: there has been no study (to my knowledge) that investigates the occurrence of succession under conditions of enrollment decline. Burlingame (1978) and Garberina (1978) came close to this issue in their respective studies on the effects of socio-economic factors on incumbent defeat and superintendent turnover, but their analyses looked more at the effects of assessed valuation and tax rates.

This lack of research (on the effects of decline on succession) in the two literatures is indeed unfortunate because managing decline is the dominant issue for many educational organizations (Abramowitz & Rosenfeld, 1978; Berger 1982; Boyd, 1982; Cibulka, 1983; Zerchykov, 1981). Management strategies have significant policy implications for program, facilities, and personnel, as well as social and psychological consequences (Crespo & Haché, 1982). For example, Keough (1978) argues that when the crunch comes, specialty areas (art, music, counseling) are usually the first programs to go at the elementary level, while electives, advanced courses, and non-government mandated programs suffer at the secondary level. In terms of facilities, fewer and fewer students each year cause a board to reevaluate its grade structure, school closure, and facility disposal policies (Weatherley, Narver, and Elmore, 1983). Finally, in the personnel category a decrease in students precipitates board review of its reduction-in-force (RIF) and early retirement policies (Phelan, 1983).

One major policy question for the board (and superintendent) is whether it is in their (collective) interest to continue the current leadership arrangement. Often, boards become dissatisfied with their chief executive; superintendents grow weary of being the lightning rod for problems and controversial policies (e.g., school closings). As the crisis heats up, many policymakers attempt to usher in "a new era" by firing (or politely accepting the resignation of) the superintendent. Recently, Keough stated:

> It would be logical to assume that the number of fired superintendents was significant enough to warrant inclusion of a session titled "Superintendents Under Seige: When to Fight and When to Run" at the recent AASA Convention in Atlantic City, while the American School Board Journal ran articles on How to Fire Your Superintendent. The superintendent ranks are becoming filled with people who "write their business cards out in pencil." (1978, p. 335).

The purpose of this paper is to build on existing knowledge about succession and superintendent turnover by analyzing the occurrence of succession within the context of public school districts that are experiencing enrollment decline. After analyzing three explanations that predict the event of superintendent succession, the discussion will turn to methodology, results, and conclusions.

Theory

Three explanations for the occurrence of succession can be derived from the management and politics of education literatures. The first reason is poor performance. Despite some skepticism about the ability of individual leaders to control organizational outcomes (Lieberson & O'Connor, 1972), the conventional wisdom is that an administrative change is brought about by the need to improve organizational performance. The argument is that the chief executive is responsible for organizational performance and in the case of poor performance, the organization may need to obtain a new leader to "turn things around" (Brown, 1982; Helmich, 1977; James & Soref, 1981).

The second explanation is related to performance but focuses more on strategy. The argument here is that strategy should be used to evaluate top management. When a crisis occurs in the organization, it may be necessary to recruit new leaders who have not been committed to the inappropriate strategies and policies of the past (Osborn, et al., 1980; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1980).

The third explanation focuses on the politics of succession (Carlson, 1962; Lutz & Innaccone, 1978; Zald, 1965; Zald & Berger, 1978). The major contention of this perspective is that the probability of succession is related to the chief executive's relationship with his/her board. In the management literature, Pfeffer & Salancik (1977) and Allen & Panian (1982) found that a change in ownership upsets the dominant coalition and is directly

related to a change in leadership. Dissatisfaction theorists (e.g., Lutz & Iannaccone, 1978) in the politics of education literature echo this very same theme. Mitchell (1978) describes their view of the succession process as follows: (1) district population changes occur (e.g., immigration, outmigration, annexation); (2) these changes are accompanied by ideological changes to existing school policies; (3) changed ideologies lead to dissatisfaction with the current board and its management practices; (4) because boards are typically insensitive to these changes, political action and conflict are required to secure the desired changes; (5) the conflict/dissatisfaction is expressed in the voting booth where incumbent board members are defeated (ID); (6) this ID, in turn, eventually leads to superintendent turnover (STO); and, (7) the new board brings in a new superintendent from the outside to change district policy and re-establish a new equilibrium.

Method

Sample

A non-random sample of 56 school districts whose enrollment decline experiences were reported in case studies was used to investigate these predictors. Originally, 70 cases were selected for analysis, but to control for differences between early and late decliners, 56 of the 70 cases whose peak enrollment year was on or before 1970-71 were chosen for the sample. The districts by type were urban = 16, suburban = 30, and rural = 10.

Data Collection

Data over a ten-year period (beginning with the year of peak enrollment) were collected via the case survey method (see Berger, 1983; Osborn, et al., 1980). The ten-year timeframe was chosen to provide enough time for succession to occur. The politics of education literature reveals a lack of knowledge about the duration and spacing of episodic policy adjustments.

Walden (1966), Moen (1971), and Eblen (1975) all thought there might be three or perhaps four years between incumbent defeat and superintendent turnover. Mitchell & Thorsted (1976) argued that the "change impulse" may take from seven to thirteen years.

The case survey method involves the analysis of cases with a closed-ended questionnaire called a checklist. The checklist contains variables of interest to the researcher and permits the quantification of qualitative case studies. Although not suitable for all kinds of research, the case survey is particularly appropriate when a body of evidence, like the enrollment decline literature, contains a large proportion of one-shot case analyses.

After elaborate case search and checklist development activities, trained case analysts read the cases and filled out the checklists -- one for each district. A follow-up interview procedure with personnel from the district supplied much of the missing data from the original case materials. To control for unreliable checklist application (when analysts fail to see or judge events in the same way), 36 of the 56 cases (64%) were reassigned at random to a second analyst to determine the degree of consistency between two independent raters of the same district. On a random sample of 50 items per checklist, the average Pearson's correlation coefficient, corrected by the Spearman-Brown Prophecy Formula, was .78. Differences in the interpretation of case events were resolved by the author before computer coding occurred.

Measurement

Succession. Succession (a new superintendent) was measured as occurring (1) or not occurring (0). Some districts had multiple successions within the ten-year period, but only the first succession was used in this study. The explanations for replacement were also omitted from the analysis because these are difficult to interpret. Lutz (1982), for example, has shown that a

voluntary resignation could actually be a firing in disguise. He states, "Although Harrel (the superintendent) had resigned, most board members agreed that he would not have been reelected 'under any circumstances'" (1982, p. 12). The predictor variables for the succession districts were averaged over the years before the succession occurred, whereas the variables for the nonsuccession districts were averaged from the year of peak enrollment.

Performance. There were three measures of district performance. First, the pupil-teacher ratio was used as a crude indicator of educational quality. Since teacher unions perennially argue that there is an inverse relationship between class size and educational quality, the assumption of this study was that the lower the ratio, the higher the relative performance, and hence, the lower the probability of succession.

The second measure of performance was per pupil expenditures, controlled for inflation. Used as a measure of resource effectiveness (Yuchtman and Seashore, 1967), the hypothesis was that the greater the per pupil expenditure (i.e., the greater the ability to attract educational resources), the lower the probability of succession.

The final measure of performance was facility utilization. The hypothesis was that high-performance districts experienced greater utilization of their facilities than low-performance districts. Under-utilization of facilities is an indicator of poor fiscal performance. Utilization was measured by the ratio of students per building over the measured years divided by students per building in the peak enrollment year, under the assumption that the peak enrollment year was the year of greatest facility utilization. Two different examples will illustrate how this ratio works. If a district averaged 900 students in four buildings over the measured years and 1000 students in four buildings in the year of peak enrollment, that is,

there were no schools closed, the utilization ratio for the district is .90 (900/4 divided by 1000/4 = .90). If, on the other hand, the district closed one school, the utilization ratio would be 1.2 (900/3 divided by 1000/4 = 1.2). Ratios less than one indicated an underutilization of facilities.

Strategy. Ten different stategies measured a district's response to decline. The checklist included the following: (1) initiate a referendum, (2) lobby for a tax increase, (3) serve new clients, (4) rent surplus space, (5) cut budgets, (6) freeze hiring, (7) stimulate early retirement, (8) reduction-in-force (RIF) by seniority, (9) RIF by performance criteria, and (10) close/consolidate schools. District responses were weighted and combined into a response scope value where the greater the scope score, the more personnel and structural change occurred in the district. Following the dissatisfaction theorists, the working hypothesis was the lower the strategic response score, the greater the probability of succession because significant policy changes (i.e., high response scope scores) were more likely to occur after succession rather than before.

Politics. Earlier succession studies measured political dissatisfaction in terms of whether or not incumbent board members were defeated at the polls (Freeborn, 1966; Walden, 1966). However, Mitchell (1978), Mitchell & Thorsted (1976), and Lutz (1982) have argued that ambiguity and measurement problems are often associated with a simple dichotomous defeat/no-defeat type of variable. For example, many board members are appointed rather than elected. Secondly, board members often choose not to run for re-election rather than risk defeat. Finally, the rate of voter turnout may affect election outcomes: if voter turnout is high and incumbents are defeated, it may indicate more dissatisfaction than if voter turnout was relatively low. To rescue the situation, we measured the superintendent's relationship to three

important constituencies: the board, teachers, and community.

A strain in the relations with one or more of these groups was considered a reflection of a politically dangerous situation for the superintendent and increased the likelihood of succession. Each relationship was evaluated in the measured years on a scale from 5 = collegial relations to 1 = hostile relations.

To measure the change in school population, a measure of enrollment volatility was constructed (i.e., enrollment decline from the peak enrollment year). Following the predictions of the dissatisfaction theorists, we hypothesized that the greater the decline rate, the greater the probability of a change in ideology, the greater the likelihood of board/administration insensitivity to new needs, and the greater the pressure for a change in executive leadership.

Data Analysis

Discriminant analysis was chosen as the analytic tool for this study because it measures the success with which predictor variables discriminate among groups that are specified in advance (succession vs. nonsuccession districts in this study) and because it provides an efficient basis for explaining the nature of these differences. The technique accomplishes these goals by forming a linear combination of the discriminating variables in a way that maximizes the separation of the groups (Klecka, 1975). Once this separation occurs, statistical tests of significance can be applied to determine the extent to which the discriminating variables distinguish the two groups when combined into the discriminant function. In addition, the method produces a weighted coefficient for each predictor that can be interpreted the same as beta weights in multiple regression. As a follow-up, the discriminant function was used to classify the districts and a stepwise discriminant analysis identified the more important predictors.

Missing data for cases of the independent variable were supplied by the appropriate variable means. Huberty (1975) argues that this procedure is equal to or superior to any other proposed method for handling missing data in linear discriminant analysis.

It should be noted that the use of discriminant analysis assumes a multivariate normal distribution in the independent variables. Since this study included some predictors that were measured on less than an interval scale, this assumption was violated. However, Klecka (1975) points out that, in practice, the discriminant analysis technique is very robust and this assumption can be relaxed.

Results

For the 56 districts studied, 40 (71% of the sample) experienced executive succession after the peak enrollment year. When the districts were analyzed by type (see Table 1), the chi-square statistic was 1.99 (n.s.). The event of succession, in other words, was independent of whether the district was urban, suburban, or rural in nature. Prior to the discriminant analysis, the zero-order correlation coefficents were examined for multicollinearity (see Table 2). The results indicate a relatively low degree of association.

(Insert Tables 1 and 2 about here)

When the various predictors were analyzed by theoretical group (see Table 3), the canonical correlation (a measure of the discriminant function's ability to distinguish succession vs. nonsuccession districts) showed that the variables in the three groups (performance, strategy, and politics) were able to distinguish succession versus nonsuccession districts. These results are indicated by the Lambda, an inverse measure of the discriminating power in the original variables, and the chi-square statistics (Klecka, 1975).

(Insert Table 3 about here)

When all eight variables were entered together, the canonical correlation coefficient was .44 with a chi-square of 41.23 ($p < .05$). However, only four factors were significant predictors of succession. They were: per pupil expenditure, response scope, superintendent-community relations, and superintendent-board relations. Table 3 also indicates the results of the stepwise analysis using the Wilks' criterion. Here, the canonical correlation was .38 with an associated chi-square of 39.25 ($p < .05$). The standardized discriminant coefficients (see Table 3) represent the relative contribution of the variable to the discriminant function. The data indicate that superintendent-community relations made the greatest contribution when the variables were entered in a stepwise fashion.

Finally, the calculated discriminant function for the four significant predictors was used to classify the existing districts in the two groups. Table 4 indicates that 77% of the succession districts and 75% of the nonsuccession districts were classified correctly. It should be noted, however, that these percentages may be liberal because the discriminant function was derived from these particular organizations, and therefore, is expected to do better with these districts.

(Insert Table 4 about here)

Discussion

At the most general level, the importance of the three groups of predictors of executive succession has been confirmed in this study. The occurrence of succession was traced back to performance, strategy, and political variables. Districts that experienced succession had higher per pupil expenditures, greater strategic change, and more hostile superintendent-community and superintendent-board relations than districts not experiencing succession.

The clearest result of this investigation is in the political variables. Although the superintendent-teacher relations variable was not able to predict succession in our sample, superintendent-board relations did. This finding supports the dissatisfaction theorists' argument that leaders must be compatible with their boards. We infer from the presence of strained relations that there may have been divergent "definitions of reality" between the superintendent and his or her board on the relative importance (or lack thereof) regarding certain cutback-related policies. This finding is augmented by the significance of the superintendent-community relations variable. The data suggest that the superintendent's relationship to the community is also important. While not incompatible with the dissatisfaction theorists' major position, these data suggest that the probability of succession is increased when both the board and the community have hostile relations toward the superintendent.

Turning to strategy, the data indicate that the greater the scope of strategic response to decline (e.g., RIF and school closings), the greater the likelihood of succession. This finding is contrary to our original prediction, but supports the often-heard saga of superintendents who resign or are fired in the wake of controversial school closings. Cuban (1979) points out that the fear of political suicide, triggered by school closures, is deeply embedded in the superintendent folk wisdom.

Finally, the data show that one dimension of organizational performance, namely, per pupil expenditures, discriminates between succession and nonsuccession districts: the higher the per pupil expenditures, the greater the probability of succession. However, this finding is also contrary to expectations. We hypothesized that districts with lower resource effectiveness would be more

likely to experience succession than districts with greater resource effectiveness. The question is why would districts with greater per pupil expenditures be more likely to experience succession?

One explanation is that per pupil expenditure may not be an appropriate measure of performance. While organizational researchers (e.g., Yuchtman and Seashore, 1967) may like to think that it is a measure of the ability to attract resources, in truth, it may reflect an inability to manage resources efficiently. Alternately, districts with higher per pupil expenditures may be larger in size and more heterogeneous than districts with lower per pupil expenditures. If this is true, then size and heterogeneity, not pupil expenditure, predict succession (Gordon & Becker, 1964; Grusky, 1961). Finally, it could be argued that districts with relatively higher per pupil expenditures (i.e., urban districts) experience greater demands and expectations by consumers of educational services (Cibulka, 1983). Since these demands often conflict with other educational priorities, the pressure caused by irreconciliable expectations (and fiscal strain) may eventually takes its toll on the chief executive and cause him/her to vacate the executive role.

Conclusion

In summary, this study has focused on the occurrence of succession in school districts with declining enrollment. Using a relatively new research methodology known as the case survey, the data indicate that four factors distinguished succession and nonsuccession organizations. They were superintendent-community relations, superintendent-board relations, response scope, and per pupil expenditures.

While the generalization of these findings must be necessarily cautious, the analysis has shown that superintendent succession (in districts with declining enrollment) is a multifaceted phenomenon. This study confirms

the current wisdom of the importance of these variables, but it goes farther to isolate other important predictors (e.g., per pupil expenditures and response scope).

From a theoretical standpoint, the data were not always consistent with the earlier predictions. First, where the dissatisfaction thesis predicted population changes (step 1 in the succession process) would be a significant predictor of succession, the results of this study suggest that the rate of enrollment decline does not (by itself) distinguish between succession and nonsuccession districts. Presumably, the degree of fiscal strain is an important factor as well (Boyd, 1982; Cibulka, 1983).

Second, where both the management and dissatisfaction literatures identify the significance of strategy on succession, the findings of the present analysis show that superintendent succession is more likely to occur in districts that take bold, new policy initiatives (e.g., school closings) than in districts not taking such actions.

While this observation does not necessarily refute the assertion that significant policy changes occur after (rather than before) succession, it suggests a possible variation in the dissatisfaction thesis. For example, the presence of enrollment decline and irreconcilable expectations often leads a superintendent and board to enact significantly new policies that contradict the prevailing community ideology (e.g., a board's decision to close a cherished, but cost-ineffective, neighborhood school). In these instances, it is the community (rather than the educational leadership) that exhibits insensitivity to the changing conditions. Attempts to adapt by changing the status quo triggers community opposition which, in turn, may transform the forward-thinking chief executive (i.e., the bearer of the ill-tidings) into a scapegoat (Gamson & Scotch, 1964).

Second, a board may come to the conclusion that cost-effective measures must be taken, but find their superintendent is either ill-prepared or unwilling to take on the technical and political tasks of retrenchment. Third, a superintendent may have a "lust for retrenchment" that goes well beyond the needs of his/her board, but is still appropriate for the fiscal problem that exists in the district. In this case, the superintendent is still incompatible with the community and board, but from an objective standpoint, he or she is more (rather than less) responsive to the changed conditions. Finally, a superintendent may leave the district -- not out of community and/or board dissatisfaction -- but rather because the pressures and dilemmas of retrenchment are simply too much to bear. When a less complex job offer is received, the beleaguered chief executive may jump at the chance to get out of the pressure cooker.

The point of these examples is to illustrate that succession may be grounded in dissatisfaction, but the nature and sources of this satisfaction may actually vary. Students of organizations realize that change is a continual process of adaptation to new circumstances. Often an organization will (indeed must) change its leadership to facilitate the adaptation process, but it is also possible that the act of succession is nothing more than a reflection of changes that have occurred in the district or totally unrelated factors. Previous research on superintendent turnover has glorified the succession process and assumed an episodic sequence of: population changes, board insensitivity, community dissatisfaction, incumbent defeat, and superintendent turnover. Yet, the forces and pressures for succession may be more (or less) complex and the process may originate with the superintendent rather than the community or board. The challenge now to educational researchers is to specify more clearly the effects of decline on succession.

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TABLE 1. Comparison of Succession and Nonsuccession Districts by Type (N = 56)

	District Type			
	Urban	Suburban	Rural	Total
Succession Districts	12	20	8	40
Nonsuccession Districts	4	10	2	16
TOTAL	16	30	10	56

$\chi^2 = 1.99$; df = 2; n.s.

TABLE 2. Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Coefficients for the Predictor Variables (N = 56)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Pupil-tcher ratio	-							
2. Per pup. exp. (000)	-.28							
3. Utilization	-.16	-.29*						
4. Response Scope	.18	-.30*	.26					
5. Sup-Bd Relations	.08	.18	.20	.17				
6. Sup-Tcher Relations	-.21	.27*	.23	-.22	-.19			
7. Sup-Cmnty Relations	.10	.19	-.30*	-.24	-.20	-.22		
8. Enr. Volatility	.20	.24	-.18	.19	-.22	-.28*	-.24	
Mean	24.21	1.29	.86	14.7	3.6	2.9	3.6	.12
S.D.	2.72	.76	.09	5.1	1.3	1.2	1.3	.05

* $p < .05$

TABLE 3. Discriminant Analysis of Succession and Nonsuccession Districts (N = 56)

Function/Variable	Canonical Correlation	Wilks' Lambda	Chi Square	Standardized Discriminant Function Coefficients: Hierarchial	Stepwise
Performance	.49	.78	8.32*		
1. Pup-Tcher ratio				.22	
2. Per pup. exp.				.42**	.32*
3. Utilization				-.16	
Strategy	.40	.85	9.03**		
4. Response scope				.37*	.36*
Politics	.49	.76	14.64**		
5. Sup-Bd Relatns				-.44**	-.39*
6. Sup-Tcher Relatns				-.11	
7. Sup-Cmnty Relatns				-.54**	-.47**
8. Enr. volatility				.15	

* p < .05
** p < .01

TABLE 4. Classification of Succession and Nonsuccession Districts (N = 56)

	Number Classified in Succession Group	Number Classified in Nonsuccession	Total
Succession Group	31 (77%)	9 (23%)	40
Nonsuccession Group	12 (75%)	5 (25%)	16
			56

END

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